

HISTORICAL NOTES OF THE SETTLEMENT ON NO. 4, BROWN'S

TRACT IN WATSON, LEWIS CO., N.Y. STEPHENS

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HISTORICAL NOTES

OF THE

SETTLEMENT ON NO. 4,

BROWN'S TRACT,

IN WATSON,

LEWIS COUNTY, N. Y.

WITH

sup.
W. Hudson Stephen

NOTICES OF THE EARLY SETTLERS.

"Neque semper arcum tendit Apollo."

UTICA, N. Y.

ROBERTS, PRINTER, 60 GENESEE STREET.

1864.

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ORRIN FENTON.

Photo. by Van Hook,
Lewville, N. Y.

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(Stephens, W. . Hudson,

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The following NOTES were chiefly prepared for the consideration of a Club formed with a view, in part, to the local history of LEWIS COUNTY, and not for publication.

Proud of its past, and solicitous of its future annals: To those living of the *Early Settlers of the Black River Country*, and the descendants of those dead, this Historical Brick from the hearthstone of a well-known locality in that Country, is respectfully inscribed.

MARTINSBURGH, June 1, 1864.

W. HUDSON STEPHENS.

NO. 4.

CHAPTER I.

ROUTE.

From Mount Tahawus, (Marcy,) the Adirondac range—the Mountain Lake, and Wilderness region of New York—slopes to Lake Champlain and River St. Lawrence, on the E. and N., and the Black River on the West. Upon the Western base, the locality of No. 4 is situated. The distance over Rail and Plank Road from Trenton Falls to Lowville is forty-one miles. It is a journey thence of eighteen miles from LOWVILLE.

Passing the spot where the first settlers of Lowville rested with their families on the first night of their settlement of the new township—10th April, 1798; the old swing-gate guarding the Black River flats, erected so long ago the records of its legal existence have died out from the Town book: the curvilinear road on the river bank, where negligence or town penury has sacrificed so many horses: the State swing-bridge over the River Improvement,

with its works of support and defense against the stream, and famous in recent State political struggles: the grove-surrounded residence of Commissioner Beach: the Church upon the plain of WATSON, fixing the landscape from the West: the home of "Hunter" Higby—the volunteer at fifty-five:—the solid brick school-house: the square-roofed residence of Ex-Sheriff Kirly, now the home of the Fenton: over sand deep, sand hard,—hill, level, and stream, beyond Crystal Lake, and across the famous Black Creek;—we stop at Robert Griffiths, the justice, hunter, and local preacher, with its chain-pump in front, and school-house opposite. It is the last school-house we shall find.

An irregular, winding road, through woods for eight miles, and we emerge amid partially cleared lands, with here and there an apple and cherry tree in the grass plot of a deserted farm—into quite a "deserted village"—houses without tenants—barns wanting boards and crops—an abandoned school-house, windows out and door gone—into the cultivated clearing of No. 4. Beyond CHAUNCEY SMITH'S, on left, and the Champlain Road, extending eighty miles into the Wilderness, on right, the red house of FENTON, perched on brow of the hill, is approached by road leading down to

WETMORE'S, and through the lot to the landing on Beaver Lake.*

Mountains covered with evergreen, huge, and stretching away into the distance—the indented lake with its islands, and beach crowded with fishing craft, and an occasional shanty—with the breeze wafting the dull, resonant sound of the waters at “the Falls,” on the river below;—who, fresh from the settled Valley of the Black River, ever loses the impress from memory’s tablet which this first view ever makes on the enraptured vision? How appropriate here the rejected verses of “Gray’s Elegy:”

How the sacred calm that breathes around,
Bids every fierce, tumultuous passion cease;
In still, small accents, whispering from the ground,
A grateful earnest of eternal peace.

There scattered oft, the earliest of the year,
By hands unseen are showers of violets found:
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,
And little footsteps lightly print the ground.

* Francis. Wood. Salmon, Beaver Dam, and Crooked Lakes are easy of access from No. 4. Trout and Salmon are the principal fish--Deer Stalking frequent and successful—“Floating,” in June—May and September, principal fishing.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST FISHING PARTIES.

To realize No. 4, is to seek and find *repose*—exclusion and “without care”—from the treadmill of labor, the anxieties of politics, the perplexities of traffic, and from the chain-like task of a weary and overtaxed brain. Here, in the earlier annals of Lewis County, Alexander W. Stow, I. W. Bostwick, and others departed, sought convivial hours and glorious freedom. It is a place

“For all ye wretched mortals
Aspiring to be rich ;
And ye whose gilded coaches
Have tumbled in the ditch.”

From the traditions about the camp fire, the reminiscences of other days, with characteristics of the actors, are easily gathered.

Of the first *fishing* party to No. 4, (1818 or '19,) were, Cornelius Low,* Heman Stickney,† Otis

* Agent, with Bostwick, of his father, Nicholas Low of New York city, proprietor of Lowville, from 1818 to 1826. Was a brother of Mrs. Charles King, President of Columbia College. Died 1849.

† Owned an oil mill on site of Willard's factory. Lowville ; ~~brother~~ in-law of Ehud Stephens, who with Jonathan Rogers were first settlers of Lowville.

Whipple;* Charles Dayan,† Russell Parish,‡ Samuel Rogers,§ with Thomas Puffer|| as guide. They went with team as far as John Beach's, (seven miles east of Black River,) thence on foot, having Sam. Rogers' *borrowed* horse with packages.

The most noticeable incidents of this *pioneer* party, who camped at "Fish Hole," and fished at Beaver Falls, for eight days, early in June, was, the naming of the creek, at the Fish Hole, "*Sunday Creek*," alike from their attachment to the name, and it being commemorative of the day of their camping there. The burning, at the camp fire, by Low, of both his boots, and improvising bark ones; and that Sam. lost his horse, which was found after an absence of three weeks.

* Lowville merchant; years before his death a resident of Utica.

† Student of Bostwick and Low; State Senator in 1828, and President *pro tem.* of the same; defeated by Silas Wright, Jr., 1829, for Comptroller, in Legislative Caucus; in Congress, 20th District, from 1831 to '33, and a member of Committee on Manufactures.

‡ Graduate Yale College, 1813; Lawyer at Lowville; Member of Constitutional Convention, 1846, from Lewis County. Died, 1855, at Lowville.

§ Son of Capt. Rogers, of Lowville; educated at Hamilton College; a lawyer. Married and died at New Orleans.

|| Native of Princetown, Mass.; settled in Watson about 1800; for many years the only settler. Died about 1836. A large family survived him, among them, Isaac, widely known as "chapter and verse" minister of the M. E. Church.

The following year, Alex. W. Stow,* James T. Watson,† and Ziba Knox tried their luck at the locality for one week.

* Native of Lowville; removing from Lowville, he died, September 14, 1854, at Milwaukee; Chief Justice of Wisconsin; son of Judge Silas Stow, of Lowville, and brother of Horatio J. Stow, late of Erie County.

† *James Talcott Watson* made the first attempt to settle these lands. (Watson,) and for many years was accustomed to spend his summers in the county, at Lowville. He was a man of fine education and affable manners, and in early life was a partner in the house of Thomas L. Smith & Co., East India Merchants, in which capacity he made a voyage to China. The death of a Miss Livingston, with whom he was engaged to be married, induced a mental aberration, which continued through life, being more aggravated in certain seasons of the year, while at others it was scarcely perceptible. In after life, the image of the loved and the lost often came back to his memory, like the sunbeam from a broken mirror, and in his waking reveries he was heard to speak of her as present in the spirit, and a confidant of his inmost thoughts.

In his business transactions, Mr. Watson often evinced a caprice which was sometimes amusing, and always innocent. This was, by most persons, humored, as tending to prevent any unpleasant result, which opposition might at such times have upon him. In the summer of 1838, he undertook to cultivate an immense garden, chiefly of culinary vegetables, upon his farm in Watson: beginning at a season, when, under the most favorable conditions, nothing could come to maturity, and insisting that he would be satisfied if the seeds only sprouted, as this would prove the capacity of his land.

In his social intercourse Mr. Watson often evinced, in a high degree, many noble and manly qualities. With a lively fancy and ready command of language, he had the power of rendering himself eminently agreeable, while many of those who settled upon his tract, will bear witness that he possessed a kind and generous heart. But there were moments when the darkest melancholy settled upon him, utterly beyond relief from human

Its earlier reputation—it has one for purity, for peace, and innocent *abandon*—kindly cared for, has brought frequenters from a distance. Here the massive brain and keen perceptive which, as Chief Justice of the State,* pronounced the judicial *fiat* of its highest Court against legislation trenching on reserved privilege; the legal giant† of the Fifth District, venerable and replete with learning, to whom the “hour” rule of the Court seems to have no reference; and that fatherly Judge, laborious and *faithful to the public business*,‡ who could consent to stay in Lewis County over one week to discharge his functions, and others,§ have been found refreshing their jaded intellectual powers, lulled by nature’s kindest harmonies. Constable’s “shanty,” at No. 4, and their “Point,” on Racquette Lake, forty miles beyond, and the names of ladies on the “Notched Tree,” on top of Mt.

sympathy; and in one of these he ended his own life. He committed suicide with a razor, in New York, January 29, 1839, at the age of 50 years. His estate was divided among thirty-nine first cousins on his father’s side, and five on his mother’s; and some of these shares were still further subdivided among numerous families. The sixty thousand acres, when divided, gave to a cousin’s share over sixteen hundred acres, but some parcels amounted to but thirty-three acres.—*Hough’s Lewis County*.

* Comstock, of Syracuse. † B. Davis Noxon. ‡ D. Pratt.

§ P. H. Agan, Editor *Syracuse Standard*. “Club,” Watertown; Springfield, Mass., &c.

Emmons, (Blue Mountain,) eighty miles in the wilderness from Lowville, reveal who are frequenters of the attractive regions of the Adirondac; while the annual return of a member of the New York Sportsman's Club,* throwing a line of one hundred and fifty feet, with reel, impresses its value to the Waltonian.

* Judge Stevens, of Hoboken.

CHAPTER III.

PRESENT SETTLEMENT.

In 1822, a settlement was begun in the eastern border of the town, (Watson,) on No. 4, Brown's Tract, by Aaron Barber and — Bunce. In 1826, Orrin Fenton settled, "and is still, with one exception, the only settler living in that part of the town."

Hough's Lewis Co., "Watson," p. 225.

This is the chronicle of the local historian of the *settlement* of this, one of the most interesting localities in the County. Here Fenton and his "busy housewife" have lived for nearly forty years.

"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray :
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenour of their way."

His head is whitened with the snows of seventy-nine winters,

"While years
Have pushed his bride of the woods, with soft and inoffensive
pace,
Into the stilly twilight of her age."

With an intimate knowledge of every locality within miles, the "runways" of deer, the "haunt" of bear and panther, and "resort" of game; the discoverer of lakes and streams, fish-holes, beaver

meadows, and windfalls; a faithful disciple of Walton—he has quietly pursued his gentle avocations of the fisherman and hunter, remote from busy haunts, and secluded beyond most men from the world, for above the average of life; relinquishing them only when time's mutations, crossing his threshold, has removed his (fourteen) children to other scenes, and made sad havoc on his once athletic frame. For about eighteen years, two families, Smith* and Wetmore, have been his only neighbors. Without litigation—almost beyond all public duty or burdens, except the draft, (the call of war reaches every abode,) these FAMILIES, without schools or ministration, have mingled the duties of the farm, and sports of the field and stream. As if to mock them of their happiness, the town elected Arettus Wetmore a constable, and imposed road duties upon another—but the process which the one carries, are as scarce as the civilized victims of written law, within the great area of nature which, with his unerring rifle, he so often traverses.

* *Chauncey Smith*, an old-school hunter, has keep for teams on the south branch of Beaver River, (on Champlain road,) eighteen miles east of No. 4, and is the only sojourner between No. 4 and Racquette. Visitors are also entertained by him at No. 4.

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST SETTLERS ON NO. 3 AND 4.

But our concern is with THE PAST of this No. 4—its history, hopes, settlement, and people. The first *settler* in its vicinity is believed to have been Ephraim Craft, on the Champlain road, beyond No. 4, on this (west) side of Beaver River.

One Lippincott first *bought* and lived one season at No. 4, in a stockade of upright sticks, between Francis and Beaver Lake.

As in remote localities in new countries, inducements were offered to the earlier settlers. In the West, a free village lot, or water right; here, a farm of one hundred acres to the first ten settlers. Men yield to them to find, often, East and West, the inducement is about all a pre-emptioner ever obtains. Following the ten pre-emptioners, settling around them, settlers came in shoals and schools. They presented as varied character of usefulness and merit as the fish abundant in their streams and lakes. The "old road"—now in disuetude, on No. 3, leading from Bush's Saw Mill, crossing Bunet Creek three times, to Smith's—was the scene of early effort; and there, upon its

bush-grown track, may still be seen the homes and hearthstones, eloquent in decay, around which trustful and hopeful childhood played and whiled away its "young hours," with their uncultivated gardens and orchards of ungathered fruit.

Here Chester Douglass, of Leyden, and Roswell Chubb, settled, and here Chubb's wife died. The house and orchard of Robert Griffiths, Sen'r, (in 1834,) and where several of his boys were born—among them William, lately drowned in the inlet of Tupper's Lake—is on the "old road," about two miles from No. 4. He removed to No. 4, on to the now Chauncey Smith lot.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRE-EMPTIONERS.

The ten *pre-emptioners* are stated as follows :

Aaron Barber, settled opposite and below Fenton's, now deceased.

Benjamin Bunce—his shanty was on Fenton's lot, towards Beaver Lake, same side of road.

William Chandler, settled on corner lot of Champlain Road—lives West.

Levi Barber, settled where Fenton lived—of Stow's Square.

Lorenzo Post, settled opposite Chauncey Smith's—now deceased.

Hezekiah Tiffany, settled below Smith's—died at No. 4, and buried near Wetmore.

Ives B. Rich, settled 1823, resides in Wisconsin.

John Gordon, whom Daniel Wilder bought out—now Wetmore's place.

John Rettis, settled 1826, now of Lowville.

Jabez Carter, settled in February, 1825, on one hundred and two acres, under contract with Harrischoff, to remain thereon four years, to clear sixteen acres, and build a house and barn—on which he was to receive, at the expiration of the fou

years, a deed of his "inducement." He removed therefrom in December, 1831, but not without giving the settlement the benefit of his varied skill and capacity, he having taught at No. 4 the first school, of about thirty-five scholars, at fifteen dollars per month, and boarded himself. Engaged in the mercantile business and potash manufacture; and established a still for expressing hemlock, balsam, and tamarac oils, of which he marketed a total of one hundred pounds. He also acted one year as superintendent of the common school, of which he was the teacher, and trusted out as a permanent sinking fund, about \$300 of his goods and groceries, for the general well-being of the infant settlement. He still retains, however, the fee of his one hundred and two acres, with its ninety cents yearly tax; though his attention at the age of seventy-three, in public affairs, is engrossed in the manifold and multiplied duties of Liquor Commissioner of Lewis County, residing at Lowville.

One Douglass succeeded him as teacher, removing West.

CHAPTER VI.

SUBSEQUENT SETTLERS — FENTON'S PANTHER HUNT—RELIGIOUS INTEREST.

Of the first shoal of settlers, endeavoring to fix a *permanent* abode in the Wilderness, at No. 4, were:—PETER WAKEFIELD, who settled on the now Smith place, about 1826 or 1827, which place was thereafter occupied by Wilbur Palmer; ISAAC WETMORE,* (about 1834,) the white slab of whose grave, (he died September 11, 1853,) is visible from the roadside, below Fenton's, and to draft whose will, L. C. Davenport, of the Lowville Bar, traveled twenty miles and back; ORRIN FENTON, (son of Ebenezer,) born July 1, 1784, at Mansfield, Conn., successively a resident of Windsor, Conn., Champion, and Lowville, and who, losing his wife, — Barber, by whom he had seven children—five now living—afterwards married, at Lowville, Lucy Weller, of Westfield, Mass., (of their three boys and two girls, four survive,) settled at No. 4, March 20, 1826. Of all these settlers, but Fenton remains, "a rude forefather of the hamlet."

* Son of Reuben, of Spencertown, Columbia Co., N. Y.

One incident, illustrative of Fenton's early forest experience, must suffice. About 1835, Fenton set, about half a mile from Beaver Lake, and ten rods from the river of that name, a wolf trap secure by a chain to a sapling. On visiting his trap, he was somewhat surprised in not finding it, and by marks upon shrubs he traced it into a cedar swamp. Examining carefully, he discovered a "big track" therein, and arming himself with a club, advanced to a closer acquaintance with the possessor of the trap; but finding on the bushes gray hair instead of black, he wisely concluded it was *not* a bear, but was a wolf, which he might dispatch with his club. While pursuing carefully the track, he looked forward where, crouched upon all fours, beside a log, lay, ten feet from him, a large panther, with the lost trap on his fore foot. Fenton made for the other side of the log with his club, when the panther run from him some ten rods, bearing the trap. Concluding the job, (with his club,) was a *little larger* than expected, he returned for his rifle, and returning with I. Wetmore, at forty rods overhauled the panther. Fenton fired at four rods, hitting him below the eye, but did not kill him. He jumped up and faced his adversaries, growled, and savagely showed his "ivory," when a second shot by Fenton brought him down.

He weighed about two hundred pounds, and measured nine feet from tip to tip.

About 1832-35, there were about seventy-five settlers, and in 1842 a religious revival took place, at which Elder —— Blodget and others ministered, with about sixty converts.

CHAPTER VII

AGENTS—DECAY OF SETTLEMENT—DAYAN'S BET—
JAMES O'KANE.

As one by one the pioneers removed for more inviting localities, new ones came in—a squatter upon the improvements of the last owner—remained a short period, and followed his predecessor. Upon some of the lots several in succession settled and then departed, as the clouds of disaster settled, and disappointed hope grew gloriously feeble.

Hence, George Turner was found on the Chandler lot, and Henry Loomis, McBride, and Henry Davis, opposite Turner's lot, succeeded each other, while John Gordon and Brown located below Smith's, on same side.

Bunce, whose house is still held together by the coherence of old carpentry, on "Old Road," became first a settler on the lot of Fenton's, and Chubb afterwards succeeded him as possessor for a season, of the coveted domain on No. 3.

Of the residue of the settlers, temporary sojourners in that land of early promise, little is remembered. Where Grott and Burton "chopped" north of Beaver River, the most distant effort—

"picket duty against the wilderness"—is pointed out; while Fletcher's chopping is a known locality on this side that river. Peter Wakefield's family was among the last who "dug out" from No. 4, in 1847, to New Bremen.

These settlers came in the palmy days when Gov. JOHN BROWN FRANCIS figured as proprietor, and *Charles Dayan*, *John Beach*, and *John B. Harrischoff* were agents—for it required agents bustling with authority, to manage such possessions in those days.

Of the new residents who from time to time made investment in the locality, I am not informed. On Champlain road, out from No. 4, half a mile beyond Craft's clearing, is the one hundred acres which was lost by George W. Bostwick on a bet with Hon. Charles Dayan, against a new saddle, on the political result of Lewis county in the memorable contest of 1844. The vote of the county having been given *against!* the "great commoner," the lot was deeded in March, 1845.

At Stillwater, eight miles from No. 4, is the grave of James O'Kane. The following appeared in the *Northern Journal*, in January, 1858.

Died, alone in his shanty, near the confluence of Twitchel Creek and Beaver River, (Stillwater,) Herkimer county, N. Y., on the first day of January, 1858, from cancer in the stomach, JAMES O'KANE, aged about 70 years.

Deceased has lived alone in his shanty, where his lifeless remains were found, for about twelve years. From his position on his couch by the fire, his head and shoulders being gently elevated, and his hands quietly crossed upon his breast, his last hours and the departure of his spirit, were in harmony with the solitude around his forest home. An abundance of flour, cheese, butter, bread, potatoes, &c., were found in his shanty. He was a fisherman, trapper, and hunter; said to be of fair education. A worn copy of the "Gospels," and a work on the "Piscatory Art," constituted his library. He owned several boats that plied, at command of hunting and fishing parties, upon the lakes, sometimes as far up as Albany Lake. From parties he was generally the recipient of the leavings of "provisions and potations," by which his larder was replenished. Many a sportsman will recall with delight his night spent beneath the protecting roof of "Jimmy."

On the 5th inst., a party consisting of Elder Robinson, Ex-Sheriff Kirly, Jos. Garmon, William Glenn, E. Harvey, T. Kirly, F. Robinson, and A. Wetmore, buried his remains on a bluff overlooking the river, near the well-known shanty, a spot selected and formerly pointed out by "Jimmy" to Elder Robinson as the place of his repose. A rude wooden monument marks the head, and an oar the foot of his grave. He died alone.

"Found dead and alone!

Nobody heard his last faint groan,
Or knew when his sad heart ceased to beat;
No mourner lingered with tears or sighs,
But the stars looked down with pitying eyes,
And the chill winds passed with a wailing sound,
O'er the lonely spot where his form was found.

"Found dead and alone!

There was somebody near, somebody near,
To claim the wanderer as his own,
And find a home for the homeless here;
One, when every human door
Is closed to his children, scorned and poor,
Who opens the heavenly portals wide;
Ah! God was near when the wanderer died."

CHAPTER VIII.

SALE, AND REMOVAL OF FENTON.

The period of selling out the old home, of removing from the wilderness world, which he had presided over so many years, approached.

The writer, while at Wetmore's, in August, 1862, was requested to act professionally, by the proposed purchaser of Fenton's occupation and rights, in drafting the necessary papers to effectuate a sale. Being the sole attorney in the vicinage, this rare and unexpected professional engagement induced a prompt attendance at Fenton's after dinner on the day following, (Saturday.) *Fenton* and the purchaser having concluded their long consultation, and the old gentleman having occasionally exchanged views with his "better half," still active in household duties, though stooping with age; and John being called from the garden, to concur in, and approve the arrangements, the papers were in process of preparation for signature, when the original title deeds were deemed a proper muniment and guide on the occasion. The deed from Governor Francis and wife, produced after considerable delay, dated in 1826, was acknowledged before John Beach, Commissioner of

Deeds, and was discolored with age. Having never been of record, it was brought to the clerk's office, where they are supposed to know the signatures of commissioners who died about the time the clerk was born, and to record them as genuine !

The reluctance of the proprietor to dispose of his old home, and remove from his haunts and fishing grounds, was evident. It took an entire afternoon to "do the business," for which ample compensation was accorded by a ride out with John, who was going out the day following to Lowville. Fitting regard for the feelings of attachment and regret which age cherished at such an hour, was had by the purchaser, as one by one different articles of husbandry were mentioned to be included in the sale—mentioned oftentimes with a sigh, as again thought passed over the ancient woods home—by refraining to remind him of the boats and craft with which he had so many times pursued his route over the lakes, and to fishing grounds, and which it had been agreed upon should pass with the lands. By reason of such omission, they were not mentioned in the written transfer to LOSEE B. LEWIS, with possession, which he assumed on January 1, 1863, of the well known stand and farm of FENTON, No. 4.

FENTON—who shall or can chronicle the experiences of his heart-life of forty years in the Wilderness. In the memory of how many a laborer and wanderer is his cheerful, tidy home treasured, and the kindly attentions of his forest resort recalled with grateful recollections! Amid such scenes of wild beauty, the genius of *Wordsworth* was roused into active utterance of the melody of “a heart grown holier, as it traced the beauty of the world below.” The silence and solitude of the northern forest, has had its charms for him. Who will say his heart’s earlier aspirations have not been as effectually satisfied, in the solitudes of the uncultivated forest, as if he had moved amid the busy haunts of the crowded city? This sportsman by land and stream, this forest farmer, looks back upon woodland scene and experience with sighs! How true, that while hope writes the poetry of the boy, memory writes that of the man.

MARTINSBURGH, *February*, 1863.

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